

BOOKS

The System v. U.S.S. *Pueblo*

BUCHER: MY STORY by Commander Lloyd M. Bucher with Mark Rascovich. 447 pages. Doubleday. \$7.95.

A MATTER OF ACCOUNTABILITY: THE TRUE STORY OF THE PUEBLO AFFAIR by Trevor Armbrister. 408 pages. Coward-McCann. \$7.95.

To pursue military tradition faithfully is to run from nature's law. It is to give one's own life, and the lives of those in one's charge, a lower value than duty, no matter how vague or irrational the mandate may be in a particular crisis. Commander Lloyd Bucher chose nature and common sense when his test came. Rather than let his crew be slaughtered for no other purpose

confront *Pueblo's* story from different perspectives. Bucher views events through two narrow apertures: his own experience as a thoroughly conventional officer, and his status as the new skipper of a small, unimportant ship. Armbrister, who traveled and interviewed widely on the *Pueblo* story, provides a less intimate but much broader account.

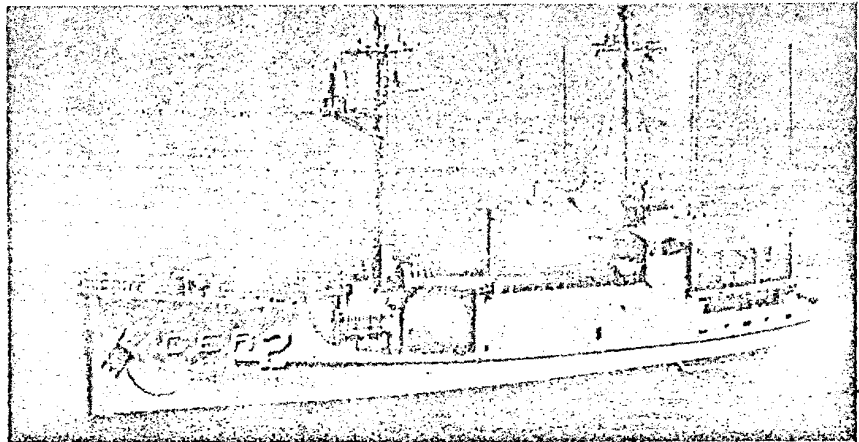
Both, for instance, make a point of the Navy's decision to classify the intelligence-gathering cruise as a "minimal risk" operation. But Armbrister traces the planning process through the chain of command in Hawaii and Washington. At the Honolulu headquarters, it was a young ensign in the intelligence section who passed on the low-risk appraisal; an experienced specialist in North Korean affairs had been shunted aside for

Pueblo was crammed with highly classified material and devices. Yet it possessed only rudimentary equipment for destroying its secrets in an emergency. The Pentagon had authorized *Pueblo* to carry a relatively large, 3-in. 50-cal. cannon. But tiny, overloaded *Pueblo* had neither the deck space for it nor qualified gunners to man it. Bucher settled for two ineffectual .50-cal. machine guns mounted in exposed positions.

Actually, *Pueblo* was never intended to fight. Its protection lay in international law or, in a crisis, possible help from elsewhere. Brigadier General John W. Harrell Jr., the Air Force commander in South Korea, was informed of Bucher's mission in advance and asked the Navy if planes should be kept on "strip alert" for a possible rescue operation; the Navy was not interested. While *Pueblo* was at sea, North Korea sent an assassination



COMMANDER BUCHER & WIFE



U.S.S. "PUEBLO"

Through narrow apertures, an inadvertent judgment.

than to maintain Navy custom, he chose to surrender U.S.S. *Pueblo* to the six North Korean vessels that had him encircled and hopelessly outgunned.

Dead, Bucher could have been a hero in the eyes of the Navy, the most tradition conscious of the armed services. Alive, he became a problem. He is the personification of a tragedy of errors that would seem incredible in even the wildest of antiwar satires. And, though he has remained in the Navy and professes his loyalty and affection for the service, he will not be silent.

Minimal Risk. In publishing *Bucher: My Story* and in assisting Journalist Trevor Armbrister to prepare *A Matter of Accountability*, Bucher rebels against the role of scapegoat that the Navy's board of inquiry tried to assign him and a few others. The commander succeeds to the extent that he shows his real adversary to have been a fantastically inefficient bureaucracy—the U.S. Navy. Armbrister's findings generally support Bucher. Yet these two densely detailed books also show, almost inadvertently, that Bucher himself was not the decisive officer he might have been.

Though they agree on all their major conclusions, Bucher and Armbrister

look at the events from different, opaque reasons. In Washington, representatives of the Pentagon, State Department, CIA, White House and National Security Agency approved *Pueblo's* excursion. One ranking NSA official warned that the North Koreans had turned pugnacious and implied that the *Pueblo* should have protection. The message caromed around the Pentagon but never reached Japan.

Before setting out from Japan, Bucher asked Rear Admiral Frank Johnson, his boss, for TNT charges to scuttle the *Pueblo* in an emergency. The request went to a supply officer, who offered thermite instead. Bucher realized that carrying thermite, an incendiary substance, was both dangerous and contrary to Navy regulations. He could have made a fuss but decided against doing so. "All I could accomplish by pressing it further," he writes as apologia, "was to upset Admiral Johnson and his staff by giving them the impression they had a skipper on their hands who seemed obsessed with the capability to blow up his own ship."

The converted Army cargo vessel was ill prepared in other respects. Though assigned to cruise near hostile coasts in

team to Seoul with President Chung Hee Park as the target. This graphic signal of Pyongyang's mood did not make the Navy any more concerned about *Pueblo*. Even after Bucher reported that he had been sighted, his superiors offered neither guidance nor protection.

Consolation Prize. Once the North Koreans started shooting, confusion aboard the *Pueblo* was matched by lack of coordination in higher echelons. Even the Navy's belated attempt to get Air Force assistance was delayed by difficulties in using a secure telephone line. Then differences between Air Force and Navy procedures led an Air Force major to believe that the message was merely a drill. The carrier *Enterprise* might have helped, but received no orders. In Hawaii, Admiral John Hyland got word of the seizure. Armbrister asked him later what he did, and Hyland replied: "We just sat there and looked at each other, and we thought, 'How is that possible?'"

Bucher is tormented by the same question. In tones alternately bitter and resigned, he tells more than his own and the *Pueblo's* story. He candidly recounts his own preoccupation with rank and assignment, and concern all too com-